DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 259 514 EC 180 250

AUTHOR Szajnberg, Nathan
TITLE The Teachers Frame of Mind: Autonomy vs. Alienation in Classrooms for Emotionally Disturbed Children.
PUB DATE [84]
NOTE 19p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Classroom Techniques; Elementary Secondary Education; *Emotional Disturbances; *Teacher Attitudes; *Teacher Role; Teacher Student Relationship

ABSTRACT

A psychiatric consultant to a large public school system's program for emotionally disturbed children describes his impressions of teachers who were able to create a daily therapeutic environment despite dismal facilities, low teacher morale and lack of administrative support. One such teacher involved his high school students in decorating and furnishing the classroom from salvaged materials. Another, a teacher of 8-to 10-year olds, exhibited an attitude of learning from the child the meaning of the child's symptoms and valuing rather than eliminating those symptoms. A third teacher used his knowledge of antiques to inspire in students an understanding of the value of the past. It is concluded that the teacher's frame of mind is a central feature in successful programing for students with emotional and behavioral problems. (CL)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED259514

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

THE TEACHERS FRAME OF MIND:

AUTONOMY VS. ALIENATION IN CLASSROOMS FOR EMOTIONALLY DISTURBED CHILDREN

Nathan Szajnberg, M.D.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

EC180250

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Nathan Szajnberg
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

On my first day as the psychiatric consultant to a large public school system's program for emotionally disturbed children, I readied myself to learn the jargon assigned by Public Law 94-142 to handicapped children: B.D., E.D., L.D., and E.R.A. And once I left the central downtown office to visit classrooms I expected to find alienated youngsters and the occasional "burnt out" adult. But I was not prepared for what I did witness: teachers overwhelmed with alienation, anomie, and resentment. As I began to adjust to the pervasive norm of apathy, my wonder shifted to the few teachers who were able to create a daily therapeutic environment. What distinguished them from their colleagues and enabled them to foster autonomy and hope, even in most trying circumstances?

THE SETTING

The special education program for emotionally disturbed children was started in the 1970's under Congressional mandate of Public Law 94-142. By 1980, in Chicago there were approximately 50 classrooms for emotionally disturbed children (they were called E.D. in the professional argot). They were quantitatively well staffed: each classroom had a teacher and a teacher's aide for every five to six children. In addition, approximately six master teachers and an equal number of social workers were

assigned to the program, divided among the classrooms. Although funded for a consultant psychiatrist, the program functioned for several years without one.

By legal mandate classrooms for the emotionally disturbed were "main-streamed" into various public schools. Prior to this, the classrooms had been segregated and, as an extension of the Supreme Court's Brown decision, these separate-but equal classrooms were found to be unconstitutional. In some cases this "main-streaming" was to the dismay of the local principal, although others were very accommodating. Those principals who were unhappy that classrooms for E.D. and other handicapped children were incorporated into regular school settings, were concerned that these children would disrupt their peers in the regular classrooms. Children were assigned to programs for the emotionally disturbed if they showed difficulties which reflected internal discord such as severe sadness or withdrawal. Those children with more "antisocial tendencies" were assigned to a different program, that is the program for behavioral disorders or B.D. There was some crossover of both children and teachers between these programs.

When I began consulting, the entire school system faced a severe fiscal crisis. Teachers, unpaid for several weeks, were uncertain of their positions. Some were laid off. Some were switched from one classroom or even one job description to

another. Others who wanted to teach emotionally disturbed children were transferred out because they did not have enough seniority to stay in these classrooms. In some cases the replacements were special education teachers with less interest and training in teaching the emotionally disturbed, but with more seniority.

Teachers described other chronic concerns that existed independent of the immediate financial problems. Some classrooms, at the principal's insistence, were placed in basements, converted bathrooms, or in one case, a teachers' lounge which retained some of its original functions: teachers from other parts of the school would stop in and out to get their lunch or coffee while the classroom was going on. Supplies were short, sometimes because they were bootlegged by other departments.

Most of the classrooms were physically dismal, with windows broken, shades torn, paint peeling, and walls barren. Some classrooms offered an appearance of external order: rules and regulations were printed carefully on the blackboard, desks were evenly aligned. But such neat outward appearance did not preclude alienation. One teacher had all the children facing the front of the room while she sat in the back. The pupils were not permitted to turn around if they wanted to get her attention. They would raise their hands and she would decide to call them or not. They were not allowed to hand completed work to the teacher. They deposited these in an envelope hanging on the

teacher's desk. The teachers described these classrooms as "structured"; to an outsider it was evident that this rigidity exacerbated the disturbed child's preexistent alienation of inner feelings and thoughts from external thoughts and behavior.

ANOMIE: THE CLASSROOM OF SCREENS

This teacher, like many others, was trying to manage a classroom of difficult children, in a sprawling, impersonal system with difficult problems. I met Mr. L., the teacher, in an informal session with several of his co-teachers in the emotionally disturbed (E.D.) classrooms.

The principal of this school was unusual; he invited several E.D. classrooms under his roof and encouraged primary grade teachers to help those children who were showing early emotional difficulties. Mr. L. did not choose to teach in an E.D. classroom. He was certified in Special Education and had elected to teach in the behavioral disordered classrooms. (These B.D. youngsters were known in the teachers' informal argot as B.A.D. children.) The children were delinquent and by virtue of this were judged administratively not to have emotional problems. When there were significant layoffs, Mr. L. opted to be transferred to an E.D. classroom. His seniority was sufficient to claim that position, but not enough to stake out his preferred B.D. classroom position. He claimed ignorance in teaching emotionally disturbed children.

I explained my interest in observing all the classrooms to Mr. L., a massive man teaching nine and ten year old children. He expressed no objection to my visiting his class at my convenience. The children, he said, were accustomed to people walking into the classroom unannounced. Although I offered to defer my visit, he invited me to stop in.

The classroom was in good physical shape, since the building was relatively new. There were five or six boys in the room, but only two or three were visible from his desk. The others were obscured by free-standing barriers Mr. L. had put up. I thought I saw two boys who had one desk behind a barrier by the back window. Mr. L. said that one was helping the other with arithmetic. We went to look in on them. Both were at one desk. One youngster still wore his coat and hood; his head was on his desk, buried in his folded arms. After some questions, he looked up, revealing the scalp stitches which he had hidden under his hood. He said he had cut his head after a fall from a roof the previous day and did not want people to see the wounds. The classroom's barriers suggested to me that the boy felt that his teacher did not care to see it either.

The other boy was telling stories to the first child of various cuts and mutilations he had seen in his life. He jumped from desk to window as he excitedly related his own injuries in life. The math book lay unopened on the desk.

Unfortunately this vignette is not atypical. The teacher was not unfeeling, although he appeared more embarrassed before me than distressed by this child who he said, frequently sat in school with his head buried. Clearly there are many factors operating in a public school system which foster such a dismal scene: an overburdened, financially strapped, politicized, and leaderless school system; societal antipathy to emotional disorders; parental abrogation of the responsibility for their children; a beleaguered teacher with his own familial responsibilities who wants to retain his job even if it be in a classroom not of his choosing. All of these factors contribute to some degree to the final scenario of two children emotionally lost behind a barrier. However, this denouement is not inevitable.

THE AUTONOMOUS CLASSROOM

In the following classrooms--one in a high school, the other in an elementary school--the teachers were able to foster a therapeutic environment and impart to their students a sense of self-direction and independence.

THE "BRICOLEUR"*

Mr. C.'s high school room was strikingly different from Mr. L.'s classroom. Although in a rather old building, the room was large, light, and airy. The space was subdivided into different functional areas within visual contact of each other: a library, a desk area, a carpeted lounge, a makeshift kitchen, a place for animals, and even a basketball hoop attached with wire to the airway vent. The walls were attractively decorated with artwork done by the students and hung at different heights. When I entered, some students were working at their desks while the teacher, an aide, and other pupils ate lunch. The lounge, with two sofas and a patchwork carpet was comfortable and welcoming. Although the visual and tactile contents of the room were obviously appealing, the story of how the room was furnished is even more so.

The students and teacher did all the decorating and furnishing at minimal or no expense. When the teacher saw secondhand sofas discarded in a nearby suburb, he and his students borrowed the school truck and brought them back. Because the legs were too high they sawed them off. To carpet the lounge area, the

*The Bricoleur is one who finds fragments or objects and combines them in ways which help us see the world from a new perspective.

teacher approached carpet companies for scraps, gave them receipts for tax write-offs, and with the students, sewed the scraps together. When he found himself chronically short of art supplies to decorate the room, Mr. M. helped his students organize a brunch for the art teachers. Subsequently the art teachers saved and donated the art scraps instead of discarding them. When he needed more bookshelves, Mr. M. had one student build shelves into an area. The "locked storage closets" were old school lockers which he salvaged from the back alley. They were repainted in bright colors. When he wanted his students to use a swimming pool, he volunteered to be the school basketball coach in return for pool time.

Perhaps I can generalize the process in terms which are meaningful to the emotionally disturbed youngster. The teacher's message to the students is that it is possible to salvage and rehabilitate physical objects and, implicitly, the emotional parts of themselves which others felt should be discarded. Like the bricoleur, this teacher took discarded fragments and put them together imaginatively to create new meaning or value.

THE BRICOLEUR'S ASSISTANT

The efficacy of this teacher's approach was made clear to me in the case of a young man that this teacher asked me to see. Mr. M.'s concern was that the young man, who otherwise enjoyed being in his class, was absent from school periodically to refurbish a dilapidated, abandoned building near his home. His

teacher was also concerned that the boy catch up on his math. This 17-year-old student, whom I will call Joe, had been thrown out of another high school for blatant and frequent drug use and truancy. To be expelled on such grounds was no minor accomplishment; the former school was notorious for and inured to drug traffic. He was quite hardened and skeptical of schools and teachers.

Joe's father had died recently and since then he was in frequent conflict with his mother. He used the house he was rehabilitating to get away from her when he felt they might come to blows.

When I entered the class, I found Joe sitting with his back to me, hunched over his math book. He was expecting me. His hands reflected hard physical labor: dirt was ground under the fingernails and into the crevices of his knuckles. Otherwise, he was clean, although his clothes were threadbare. When I asked about his renovated house, he brightened and told me how he had refurbished it imaginatively, bought furniture, and protected his new "home away from home." He had studied the history of the old neighborhood where it was located. All the houses in this block, he told me, looked as if the first floor were the basement, because they were built before there were sewer systems. When the city put in sewers (he knew the dates of this) the city had to raise the street level, so that the first floor was below and the second floor at street level.

This house and the one nearby had been abandoned by absentee landlords. "His" house had been torched. He sheetrocked each room whenever he had the money for materials. The kitchen stove did not work, so he replaced it with a Franklin-type stove from the basement for both heating and cooking. Because of vandalism, he had learned which locks were vandal resistant and protected the front door with these. He was trying to contact the landlord so that someday he might buy the house.

Although his teacher was realistically worried about the dangers of Joe's neighborhood, I suggested that he not discourage the boy's efforts. As for arithmetic, I recommended that he work out scale models of his new home. In rehabilitating an abandoned building this young man had identified successfully with his teacher and in so doing, had developed a sense of self-direction and responsible freedom.

DISCOVERING "CHARLIE BROWN"

The next teacher asked me to visit her classroom of eight to ten year olds. She wanted me to meet a child who periodically thought he was the cartoon character "Charlie Brown." While he did all his academic work well, often with obsessive detail, he would whisper dialogues between Charlie Brown and other "Peanuts" characters. During his work or classroom activity, he often burst into laughter.

Before entering the classroom, I met his teacher as she was breakfasting with the children. Unlike some other teachers who stood chatting with each other, she did not leave the children to talk with me until she could find another teacher to watch them. As she told me about the "Charlie Brown" character she asked reluctantly whether she should "eliminate this behavior." I asked her what she thought about this; she seemed ambivalent. Her teacher's education had taught her to extinguish "undesirable behavior." Yet, intuitively she knew that Charlie Brown was a precious creation of this boy's inner life which should not be "extinguished."

As we talked she realized that the Charlie Brown tale could open up a line of communication to this child's inner self. She became curious about which character she played in his world of Charlie Brown. By participating in this child's world in a nonintrusive manner, she recognized that she might be able to understand the meaning of his laughter.

The classroom space was one briefly noted above: a cramped, partly converted teachers' lounge. Teachers walked in and out to store and retrieve their lunches or snacks. Yet the room was busily quiet and the children seemed comfortable at my "intrusion." The teacher's attitude overcame the physical limits of the classroom and the potential disruptions by visitors.

As I left, this woman described how successful her three years teaching emotionally disturbed children in this system had

been, yet how much the children contributed to her own personal development.

The teacher understood intuitively that the children's symptoms were creative acts which she could value and treasure. In some cases her reaction to the symptoms taught her about her own personality. Her attitude of learning from the child the meaning of the symptom--valuing rather than eliminating that symptom--fostered the child's self esteem. Through the teacher's efforts to learn with the child about his or her inner life, the child felt that there was something valuable about himself or herself.

ANTIQUES IN THE JUNK SHOP

Mr. M. was one of the six master teachers who supervised approximately eight to ten E.D. classrooms in one area. He, like other master teachers, met regularly with classroom E.D. teachers to discuss pedagogical techniques and problem children.

The classroom teachers had varied reactions to these supervisors. Some felt that the master teachers were only dabblers in teaching who had no real expertise at "roll-up-the-armsleeves" teaching of disturbed children. Many considered them an unwanted intrusion from downtown who would criticize and possibly jeopardize the classroom teacher's position. Consequently, master teachers were often challenged with concrete and occasionally impossible tasks such as "get this crazy kid out of my classroom."

Mr. M., however, was popular among his group of teachers and their children, probably because when he came to visit, he offered to teach antiquing--one of his loves. He could detail the differences among Southwest American Indian, early twentieth century rugs, pointing out how to distinguish a Two-Grey-Hills from an Eye Dazzler. On one occasion, he might describe the plant sources of the dyes used in their manufacture or he would describe a new find, like the Early-Prairie-Style chair which he found in a junk store and now stood in his living room. Mr. M. could explain how the Prairie Style influenced Frank Lloyd Wright's architecture and tell the children where they could see such examples of architecture in the city or a nearby suburb.

The youngsters were enchanted by the idea that this man could roam through the local junk stores and spot antiques among the debris.

Mr. M.'s interest in antiques evolved out of his work as a counselor in a renowned residential treatment center for emotionally disturbed children that had lovely antiques and contemporary art throughout the living quarters. In fact, once a child was admitted, he could help design an emblem for the tall, custom-made headboard of his bed. After several years, Mr. M. noticed that he had a favorite antique table. As he found himself fingering the grain and admiring the color and texture of it, he realized that he wanted to learn more about it, and so became engrossed in the history of early twentieth century design.

Subsequently, he became a teacher in the public school system and brought his love of antiques into the classroom. In work as a master teacher, like Johnny Appleseed he sowed his interest wherever he visited.

I found myself, like the teachers and children, entranced with his descriptions. The emotional message for these disturbed children was related to that of the bricoleur. Mr. M. was devoted to the idea that one could find something esthetically valuable in the ruins of the past. He was neither afraid of nor confused by the past, as are many disturbed children who live the past as a recurrent nightmarish present. Furthermore, he imparted to the children the idea that one must take great care restoring an antique--too rigorous a job could destroy its value. In fact, a good cleaning may be all that it needs. The bricoleur finds debris and reassembles it in such a way that we see our world with new esthetic meaning; the antiquarian discovers valuables from the past, takes care not to modify them significantly, and studies how to integrate them with other antiques and contemporary pieces in the present.

These metaphors are of incomparable value to the emotionally disturbed child. This is in fact how personality reintegration takes place. One does not buy or create a completely new personality de novo. Rather, one needs to assess the elements of the personality, disassemble some, rehabilitate others, and rebuild that structure. Dante knew this when,

dissatisfied with his life in middle age, he understood he had to descend to the Inferno, to Hell, to his beginnings, to reevaluate and reconstruct the foundation of his being. There he needed to engage a guide, Virgil, the poet of reason.

In a sprawling urban public school system besieged with difficulties, the possible causes of alienation seem endless. The recent fiscal crises associated with cutbacks in Federal aid are an obvious scapegoat. Yet, as teachers described it, the same malady of anomie had been true before that fiscal crunch. Another source of problems is the difficulty of helping children who are subject to a grim array of sociocultural pressures, notably poverty, neglect, and in some cases, abusive parents. Understandably, many of these youngsters were mistrustful of teachers and the school system in general. There are other sources of alienation that spring from the dynamics of the classroom itself. Many teachers identify with and exhibit symptoms similar to those of their disturbed students, a psychological phenomenon described by Erving Goffman, Bruno Bettelheim, and other authors in various institutional settings. Clearly these factors contribute to alienation.

Yet, they do not explain why some teachers, like modern-day Virgils, can guide their youthful Dantes through the Inferno of life's vicissitudes.

I suggest that the differentiating variable is a human resource often overlooked in the politicized debates over

education: the frame of mind when one is willing to recognize value and possibility in society's castoffs, and the caring, vibrant approach to teaching which stems from this frame of mind. Congress can legislate the PL 94-142 classrooms for handicapped children, a small student-teacher ratio, teachers' credentials for Special Education, and other external factors. It cannot legislate a frame of mind.

I wish to couch my comments with a note of caution. We know from very extreme situations such as the concentration camp, that an external environment can have profound effects upon an individual's integration. I do not want to suggest that I believe in some form of social Darwinism in which those teachers who create an atmosphere of autonomy in their classrooms are necessarily heartier than their colleagues and that the surrounding external impingements should not be changed. Nevertheless, those teachers who give up in despair and place complete blame on a truly disorganized school system, succumb to one of the dangers of living in a mass society, that is their loss of individuality.

In summary, the general characteristic of those teachers who could foster an autonomous atmosphere in their classroom was their capacity to circumscribe an area, an observational frame of reference, over which they had some potential control. The three teachers in these vignettes implicitly, or on some occasions explicitly, communicated the following to their children: First,

they had a high regard for what comes from the child. Second, they fostered an atmosphere of hopefulness. Third, that atmosphere was nonjudgmental, while maintaining a clear idea of physical safety in the classroom. Fourth, they showed their regard for the value of history. Fifth, by valuing history, they communicated to the children a view that psychological remediation depended on using the building blocks of their current personalities in order to build new structures of personality.